



Testimony of  
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Education Committee  
March 15, 2023

***HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators***

Good afternoon, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. My name is Shellye Davis and I have been a paraeducator in the Hartford Public Schools for 32 years. In addition to being Executive Vice President of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, I am proud to serve as President of the Hartford Federation of Paraeducators, AFT Local 2221 and as AFT Connecticut Jurisdictional Vice President for Paraeducators and School Related Personnel.

I've seen a lot throughout my career in Hartford Public Schools. I've known great joy when our students triumph and felt tremendous heartbreak when they struggle. My fellow paraeducators and I experience those same ups and downs as we battle against scarce resources that limit our number and effectiveness and also limit our students' success. It is on behalf of paraeducators and the students we support that I testify in favor of HB 6881.

This Committee should be alarmed. There is a crisis in our classrooms. In September 2022 the State Department of Education (SDE) reported that Connecticut had 1,322 unfilled paraeducator positions across the state - 100 more than the 1,221 open teacher positions. Alliance Districts are disproportionately impacted, and special education is deeply understaffed in all districts (73% of all paraeducator vacancies and 25% of all teaching vacancies are in special education).<sup>1</sup> There's no sugar coating it. In districts as wealthy as Westport and as under-resourced as Hartford, students are not getting the services and supports they need.

Hartford Public Schools has over 70 unfilled paraeducator positions. Without an adequate number of paraeducators, students with disabilities aren't getting one-on-one assistance, teachers don't have help managing classrooms and reinforcing instruction, small group instruction isn't possible and supports for English language learners is limited. Individualized

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<sup>1</sup> Connecticut State Board of Education Agency Update 9-7-22  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BFEoK8uV\\_oqnTDa\\_dGYJ99lupYcF1eyB/view?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BFEoK8uV_oqnTDa_dGYJ99lupYcF1eyB/view?usp=share_link)

Education Plans (IEPs) are not being met. Students have suffered learning loss and social-emotional regression during the pandemic. Now, without access to trained and experienced paraeducators, they risk falling further behind instead of catching up.

Students aren't the only ones at risk. Significant understaffing has made classrooms unsafe. Paraeducators have been bitten, spit on and physically injured on the job. One of my members, struck by a student, has been out of work since September. Paraeducators have reached the end of their rope, struggling with embarrassingly low pay, unaffordable health insurance, no meaningful professional development, little hope of retirement, and now violence in the classroom. They come to me exasperated, on a regular basis, tired of being ignored and dismissed, stressed out from not being supported and exhausted from working two or three jobs. They love being a paraeducator, but they cannot afford to be the sacrificial lambs any longer. They are leaving the profession in droves.

We couldn't have predicted the pandemic, but this storm has been brewing for a long time. For more than a decade, we have come before this Committee to warn you this would happen. For years, we have been begging this Committee and SDE to give us the respect, wages and tools we need to succeed. For years, we've been told, "Not now." "We wish we could..." "There's no money." As we sit here today, Connecticut's projected FY 2023 budget surplus is \$1.35 billion. The Rainy Day Fund is full with another \$3.1 billion. You cannot tell me and my members that there is no money to invest in our children by investing in their paraeducators.

HB 6881 will help districts retain and recruit paraeducators by establishing a living wage, delivering affordable healthcare and providing a meaningful path towards retirement. It will give us a voice to ensure we get the professional development we need to be effective. It will allow us to better serve our students by letting us fully participate in IEP and 504 meetings. It will force SDE to see us and hear us by providing best practices to districts on appropriate roles and collecting data to make better informed policy decisions.

Yes, this bill is expensive. But the cost of doing nothing will be far greater. Connecticut has saved a tremendous amount by waiting decades to address these issues. Failing to act now will only exacerbate the crisis and drive more paraeducators out of our schools. IEPs will continue to go unmet; students won't reach learning benchmarks, teachers will be stretched thinner and thinner and classroom safety will become even more challenging. It's only a matter of time before something happens that can't be undone. I hope you won't let that happen.

There are no shortcuts to providing the high-quality instruction and supports that all children deserve. For decades it's been done on the backs of paraeducators. I wonder that if this workforce was not overwhelming women and workers of color, if we would be ignored and dismissed as long as we have been. I implore you to stop the madness and make transformational change. On behalf of our students who need us, please help us stay in our schools. I strongly urge you to pass HB 6881.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.